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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: AUTHORITIES DISPERSE JULY 27 DEMONSTRATIONS

REF: A. MINSK 643

[1](#)B. MINSK 620

Summary

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[1](#)1. (SBU) A large GOB security force aggressively, though non-violently, dispersed opposition demonstrations commemorating the 17th anniversary of Belarus' independence from the Soviet Union. Nine activists, including United Civic Party leader Lebedko and Belarusian National Front (BNF) Deputy Ivashkevich, were briefly detained and released without charges. BNF leader Vyachorka's son Franak and his fellow youth colleague Yaroslav Hryshchenya, who were arrested en route to the demonstrations, remained at the Okryestina detention facility over the weekend and were to be tried on July 30 for allegedly distributing illegal leaflets. The EU immediately released a statement condemning GOB arrests and the government's crackdown on peaceful protestors. End summary.

Authorities Muscle Demonstrators Off Square  
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[1](#)2. (SBU) Opposition activists and former Parliamentarians on July 27 at 16:00 were not quite able to hold a meeting on Independence Square to commemorate 17 years of Belarusian independence from the Soviet Union (ref A). Well before the meeting was to begin, an overwhelming force of traffic police, police special forces (Spetsnaz), and Belarusian KGB (BKGB) sealed off the square and surrounding streets to traffic and pedestrians. Plainclothesmen prevented anyone wearing opposition insignia from getting within 100 meters of the meeting site. According to one Radio Free Liberty/Radio Europe reporter, the nearest metro stations were also closed.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Poloffs on the scene counted at least five green armored detention wagons and approximately seven city buses full of on-alert police units on the perimeters and numerous BKGB officers patrolling the square. Before the meeting took place, poloffs observed three BKGB officers leading United Civic Party (UCP) leader Anatoliy Lebedko to a waiting police jeep that took him away without incident.

[1](#)4. (SBU) Belarusian National Front (BNF) leader Vintsuk Vyachorka and former MP and political prisoner Sergey Skrebets opened the meeting in front of independent reporters. No more than a minute later, the 40-man strong black-uniformed Spetsnaz unit surrounded the 24 meeting participants and non-violently pushed them two blocks away to the Belarusian MFA building. As they pushed the group away, police and BKGB officers formed cordons, preventing anyone from returning to the square.

## No Flowers For Yanki Kupala

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¶5. (SBU) At Yanki Kupala Park at 17:00, approximately 30-50 activists gathered to lay flowers at the Kupala memorial. Activists were not organized until a Spetsnaz unit, double the size of that at Independence Square, quickly approached the park. Head of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party Narodnaya Gramada (BSDPNG) and former political prisoner Nikolay Statkevich hastily gathered the activists into a group, which the Spetsnaz immediately surrounded, not letting anyone escape. Meanwhile, another Spetsnaz group attempted to seal off the park entrances. Poloffs and OSCE, German, and Slovak diplomats -- who were observing from a distance -- managed to escape through the Spetsnaz cordon, which eventually pushed (non-violently) the crowd two blocks away to the Minsk opera house before retreating back to their buses. Poloffs witnessed no detentions.

## Police Tell Young Park Visitors to Leave

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¶6. (SBU) At Bangalore Square, where event organizers originally planned to hold a concert at 18:00 before city authorities refused to grant permission, a large presence of green armored detainment vehicles, police buses and jeeps, and BKGB Volgas sat waiting. By 18:15, two patrolling police officers with BKGB assistance approached the few teenage and older youth sitting on benches and ordered them to leave. Parents with baby carriages and the 10-year-old boys break dancing on the concert stage were allowed to stay.

## Detainments and Arrest: Surprise, Surprise!

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¶7. (SBU) By 19:00, the independent press reported that authorities detained 11 activists during the demonstrations, including Lebedko, BNF Deputy and demonstration planner Viktor Ivashkevich and BNF Head Vyachorka's son Franak. Similar demonstration events in Vitebsk and Gomel likewise resulted in detentions. Nine of those detained were released three hours later without charges, but Franak Vyachorka and fellow youth activist from Baranovichi Yaroslav Hryshchenya were held over the weekend at the Okryestina detention facility. On July 30, a Minsk court sentenced Franak to 15 days in jail for petty hooliganism.

¶8. (U) Others sentenced in the days leading up to the demonstrations, including Pavel Severinets and Aleksey Shein, remain jailed. Malady Front Activist Dmitriy Fedaruk was sentenced on July 27 to 10 days. Youth activist Yuriy Wolfson is scheduled for release on July 30 at 22:00.

## Sharp Responses

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¶9. (U) Spokesperson for the European Commission's external relations department Christiane Hohmann on July 27 condemned the authorities' actions that "defied an EU offer for Belarus to join its European Neighborhood Policy." Hohmann's colleague Benita Ferrero-Waldner on July 26 lambasted the GOB for detaining/arresting approximately 60 activists in the lead up to the July 27 demonstration and urged the authorities to release all political prisoners "without delay." (Note: These followed the Embassy's July 24 statement denouncing the sentencing of Shein and Severinets and calling for an end to political repression. End note.)

¶10. (SBU) Lebedko on July 30 told Poloff that the overwhelming GOB response served two purposes. First, it boosted the special services' self-esteem that they can effectively disperse demonstrations, keeping them motivated. Second, it served as a warning to the opposition that the GOB

response to the March to Europe, planned for October, will be just as severe, or worse.

Comment

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¶11. (SBU) This was the first time since the 2006 presidential elections that we have seen such an overwhelming security service response to such small opposition demonstrations. However, this was the new BKGB Chief Yuriy Zhadobin's first demonstration, and perhaps he wanted to show Lukashenko how well he could control any possible enticement to public disorder. Other interlocutors have suggested mid-level officers acted aggressively to impress new superiors. Nonetheless, the heavy-handed crackdown is just another indication that Lukashenko and the GOB do not intend to implement basic democratic reforms.  
Stewart